

Harder for women to quit dependence on alcohol

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women who are drug- or alcohol-dependent. Not only is the risk of dependency increasing, but also "kicking the habit" is much more difficult for women. Today, about one third of all alcoholics are women, compared to less than 10 percent 30 years ago.

According to the National Institutes of Health, approximately 5.3 million women in the United States drink heavily enough to interfere with their health and well-being. These women are more likely to become victims of violence and can be violent themselves. Most live in dysfunctional families and are much more likely to be divorced, with children who have emotional problems and are at a high risk of alcohol or drug abuse.

Compared to men, women require much less alcohol for a shorter period of time to de-

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velop alcohol-related illnesses, such as severe liver disease, an irregular heart rate and heart failure (a condition called alcoholic cardiomyopathy). There is also increased risk of bleeding from the stomach and bowel, pancreatic disease, anemia and, perhaps most seriously, severe brain damage that can lead to loss of intellectual function.

In the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*, researchers from the Washington University School of Medicine compared the prevalence of severe alcoholism in women in

two national surveys completed a decade apart. The information was obtained from face-to-face U.S. Census Bureau surveys of 43,000 men and women conducted from 1991 to 1993 and from 2001 to 2003. Included in the survey were questions about alcoholism and factors indicating a loss of control of alcohol intake and difficulties stopping drinking.

In this survey, the prevalence of alcohol intake remained stable in men but increased by more than 50 percent in white and Hispanic women. No increase was noted in black women.

Alcoholism is a brain-based disease that leads to lifelong dependence on alcohol. It can be life-threatening. Missing work, drinking and driving, and continuing to drink despite conflicts with family or friends are serious warning signs. Alcoholism is characterized by a craving to drink, an inability to stop drink-

ing and symptoms of withdrawal if alcohol becomes unavailable. This can manifest with confusion, nausea, throwing up, tremor and severe anxiety. For severely addicted women, withdrawal can be fatal.

There is increased risk of becoming an alcoholic if you have a strong family history of alcoholism, live with an alcoholic, are able to "hold your liquor," have a history of depression, or were physically or sexually abused as a child.

If you are concerned that a loved one may have a problem with alcohol, there are well recognized screening tests for alcohol abuse. Common questions to ask: Have you ever felt a need to cut down on drinking? Have your family members or friends criticized your drinking habits? Have you felt guilty about drinking? Have you ever had a drink in the morning to calm your nerves or help a hangover? Do you wake up in the morning with no memory of the previous night?

Anyone who answers yes to one or more of the following questions almost certainly has a problem.

Sadly, for men and women, alcohol abuse usually begins at a very young age. However, it is possible that the complications

of alcohol abuse may not surface until later in life. Many women continue to drink throughout their lives, only to develop problems in their late 60s and beyond. Alcohol abuse in later life is particularly dangerous because alcohol may aggravate or precipitate memory loss and cause insomnia, depression and an increased risk of falls.

Remember, alcoholism is a disease. If you are a true alcoholic, it is virtually impossible to stop drinking without serious help or intervention. For those who become dependent, the success rate of treatment is poor. If you or someone you love has

a problem with alcohol, please seek help. Consider an inpatient or outpatient treatment center and contact your local Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) chapter. Intensive treatment provides the greatest opportunity to live an alcohol-free life while suffering from a very serious disease. Indeed, it is "one day at a time."

More information is available at:
www.dr davidhealth.com